

Methamphetamine Lab Protocol in McCracken County

Implications for Rural Social Work Practice

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is assessing the need for a methamphetamine lab protocol, when children are residing in the home where a lab is present. Identifying significant community partners and conducting a needs assessment lay the groundwork for determining the call for community change. Law enforcement and the Department for Community Based Services staff were given a survey and the answers recorded. The survey requested feedback on knowledge of current policies, relating to situations where children were present in the homes that housed methamphetamine labs. The survey instrument, also asked for unwritten protocol that was employed in this type of situation. The data showed that there is a need for a protocol that utilizes the specialized role and function of each group involved. The information gained will allow further work to be completed in this area and an actual protocol to be developed. With an adequate protocol, the needs of the children can be met in a manner that provides for their health and safety.

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Introduction

Problem Statement

In rural communities, many issues affect the safety and health of those who live there. Inadequate resources, employment or social service programs contribute to problematic situations. Each community has issues that must be resolved, in the way that they, as a community, see fit. The leaders look at the issues and develop strategies to address concerns.

The issues that are being addressed in this paper revolve around the increased use of methamphetamine, and the number of methamphetamine labs that are being discovered across the United States. The family and community problems are a concern as well. Families are being destroyed and communities devastated by the problems associated with methamphetamine use and production. The cost associated with methamphetamine use and abuse is astronomical. These cost includes legal fees, care for children and environmental clean up.

According to statistics from the DEA, the number of methamphetamine labs raided in 1998 was 3811, to 10, 078 in 2003, with over 4716 the first 8 months of 2004 (Peed, 2004). Detective Jon Hayden, of the McCracken County Sheriffs Department, estimates that at least 20 labs a year are located in McCracken County (J. Hayden personal communication April 14, 2005). Drug enforcement officials estimate that for every lab that is dismantled, there are an estimated 10-20 more that remain active (Pollack, 2004).

The labs themselves are dangerous to those cooking the methamphetamine, as well as the law enforcement, the surrounding communities and the families that live in the labs.

There are many theories of why the methamphetamine problem has expanded. Methamphetamine is cheap and easy to produce. A cooker can spend \$100.00 to make \$1000.00 (Swetlow, 2003). Methamphetamine users can stay high for up to 12 hours. The drug user can use less methamphetamine for a longer, better high. The drug is also very affordable and the high lasts longer (Scott, 2003). A user can purchase 1 gram for \$40.00-\$50.00, to 1 kilogram for \$18,000 (Scott, 2003). One estimate is that 110 methamphetamine hits can be obtained from one ounce of the drug.

There is another population that is affected by methamphetamine use that may be overlooked in the grand scheme: the children. Many times the children are actually living in the lab. These children are abused and neglected, as their parents are unable to care for them, due to methamphetamine use. Chronic use of methamphetamine may cause nervousness, paranoia, confusion, insomnia and erratic behaviors. During the last stages of methamphetamine use, violent behaviors can occur (Swetlow 2003). It appears that, "Withdrawal from high doses of meth invariably produces depression, which varies in severity and duration but may last for months or even years" (Swetlow, 2003 p. 2). Parents who are experiencing these issues are attempting to supervise children and the children are suffering.

These children may also be exposed to the toxic chemicals used to make methamphetamine, as well as the constant risk of fire or explosion, due to the combustible materials, used to make methamphetamine. Law enforcement officials wear

protective, hazardous material suits to enter the homes, where these children are sleeping and eating (Burton, 2005). Approximately 15% of labs were located due to explosions (Swetlow, 2003).

The number of families impacted by methamphetamine is becoming increasingly evident by information being obtained in the media. In the years 1999 to 2004, the number of labs increased 633%. In KY, there were an estimated 500 labs busted in 2003 (Pollack, 2005). The number of children affected grew from three in 1998, to thirty-three in 2000, to eighty-seven in 2004. The number of incidents of methamphetamine related activity, that involved children in 2002, was 2077 (Swetlow, 2003). The number of children that tested positive for toxic chemicals was 1373 in 2002, out of the 2023 living in labs (Swetlow, 2003). There were 26 children injured, with one fatality in 2002 (Swetlow, 2003).

Exposure to these chemicals can cause health problems, which include: respiratory problems, sores, dizziness, nausea, and chemical burns (Hohman, Oliver, and Wright, 2004). The long-term effects of this drug are not yet known. The use of this drug affects the community as a whole: the rate of drug use, the dangers associated with labs, the effects on the environment and surrounding area, and the added concern for the children of these people.

To assess the actual need for a protocol, we must talk with others in the community who are becoming educated to the concerns that come from the abuse of methamphetamine. Once a determination of need is made, the probability exist that the community must be willing to develop a plan to fill the need.

This need would likely be an expressed and perceived need. The issues are an expressed need, in that social service agencies see the need and the issues surrounding these problems. The local government may view it as a perceived need, as a reaction to community outrage and the environmental implications (Unrau, Gabor, and Grinnell, 2001).

Estimates are that a single cook can cost over \$25,000 to clean an average lab, though complete decontamination could range to \$50,000. The super labs can cost over \$150,000. The labs have to be cleaned, and the money has to come from somewhere (Scott, 2003).

Method

The exploratory research design was conducted by utilizing an 8-question descriptive survey. The researcher completed a qualitative research instrument. The questions asked for yes/no answers and allowed for explanation. Several questions were open ended. Demographics requested were employing agency and years of employment.

The cross sectional survey instrument was distributed to three groups of subjects that were considered front line staff, when addressing the issues encountered, when children are present in the home, where methamphetamine is used or produced. All subjects were given a copy of the informed consent letter, and there were no incentives for participation.

The survey instrument was distributed to 84 officers of the Paducah Police Department, 40 deputies of the McCracken County Sheriffs Department and 30 social workers at the McCracken County Department for Community Based Services office.

These three agencies are considered front line staff during reported drug activity that also involves child neglect. These agencies should work together as each has a role in these situations. Law enforcements to extract evidence and arrest those charged with an offense. Department for Community Based Services is slated to offer child protective services and seek stability for the children. There is no independent or dependent variable in this research. The research was exploratory in nature.

Results

The information obtained varied somewhat with each agency. The researcher received 12 of 30 surveys from Department for Community Based Services, 4 of 44 from the McCracken County Sheriffs Department, and 27 of 80 from the Paducah Police Department. The range of years of experience was: 30% of subjects having been employed 0-5 years, with 2.3% employed over 20 years. 81% of those surveyed were not aware of any protocol. Comments made regarding this indicate that officers typically leave all aspects regarding the children to Department for Community Based Services. Some officers had no idea of what happen to the child after the initial arrest of the caretaker. 60.5% of subjects did not feel adequately trained to deal with methamphetamine related issues. These subjects indicate that they just do the work, with little specialized training. This research indicates that the front line staff are not equipped or prepared for situations that involve children in methamphetamine labs. The workers are doing a job, but are not employing best practice. This information suggests that more training be established between the agencies. Several community partners expressed a willingness to learn and be involved, however they must have the opportunity. The

agencies involved indicate that they are not aware of the role of the other. Over 55% were not aware of what the other agencies were required to do. The consensus was that there was not enough training to deal with methamphetamine lab crisis.

There was also no written protocol to address the issues encountered. The agencies use an unwritten protocol to deal with these situations on a case-by-case basis. There is no evidence of follow-up to assess the medical needs of the children. There are also limited efforts to prosecute the offenders for the crimes against their own children. Those who participated in the survey appeared willing to accept more information and training on a McCracken County Protocol. Those who feel that the needs of the children are being met are over 50% with no answer to that question.

Limitations

A needs assessment was used to gather data and determine if a need exists. Limitations to this study were numerous. The instrument could have had a better layout that may have encouraged completion. The survey should have been delivered in a more exploratory manner. There were opened ended questions, with closed ended questions, along side questions that asked for ordinal data, years of service. A better method would be to place questions on the survey that would have been more specific to each group. It would have been beneficial to have a face-to-face interview. It seems that much more information would have been obtained, had explanations been given to any question that arose. Questions that were relevant to law enforcement may mean nothing to Department for Community Based Services staff. The survey did not take into account all possible answers. The answer choices should have been given to the subjects, and then only those

would need to be analyzed. Subjects made up their own answers, which had to be compiled, and adjustments made. There was no plan for surveys that were left with blanks or surveys that were returned with an answer that differed from one of the choices given. The questions were not clear in many areas and subjects left them blank.

Many of the subjects were not present when the project was explained. They were unable to ask questions after receiving the survey. They were only able to obtain their information from the explanation letter. Several members of the subject groups verbalized to me that they did not understand the reason for the survey. They advised that had they understood more, they would have been more likely to fill it out and encourage others as well.

Complete areas concerning methamphetamine labs were ignored on the survey. There were no questions regarding lab cleanup or renters that are not told by property owner that a methamphetamine lab was on their new property or even inside their house. Issues regarding decontamination are not clearly stated, even in the unwritten protocol. These environmental issues should have been discussed as well.

The researcher was only partially able to rectify the problem of explanation. I met with officers of the Paducah Police Department on two occasions to explain the project. It seems that this did have results as I received most of my surveys from the Paducah Police Department. Only half were received from the subject group in which I am a member, Department for Community Based Services.

I did not take into account the barriers that prevented subjects from having this information. These barriers could include limited money for training, supervisors

refusing to give time and attention to training, staff not seeking opportunities to learn.

The Paducah Police Department and McCracken County Sheriffs Department have several new employees. Each has many things to learn as a new recruit. There were not a large number of surveys returned from any department, especially the McCracken County Sheriffs Department. This agency would appear to deal with more labs, as they are in the county, not inside the city limits. Most methamphetamine is produced in the county, due to the smell and need for a place to produce the drug. The drug is then carried into the city for resale. It would prudent to expect more deputies to have these issues raised, but they had the least number of surveys. It is important to realize that supervisors train where they feel that there is a need. Many times due to budget constraints officer are not allowed the training that they need.

The problems associated with methamphetamine are great and reach across many areas of public concern. Further areas of research include, the willingness of community partners to become involved in a protocol. The willingness of those in management positions to be willing to participate. The need for initial medical care for these children as well as long term is important selling points to these concerns. . Many officers are not even aware that there are criminal charges that caretakers can be charged with if a child is in a harmful situation. In service, training must be held to overcome these boundaries. Other agencies should become involved as well. The need for a protocol is evident and many other areas should be addressed.

Conclusion

The conclusion was that 18.6% of those surveyed believe that McCracken County has a protocol. 81.4% think that McCracken County does not have a protocol. The data verified that McCracken County does need a protocol that allows for dealing with the issues of methamphetamine use. The survey also gives us the information that many community partners are interested in these problems and are willing to deal with it. Children are at risk with the status quo. These victims are often not obtaining medical care that is timely and appropriate, as the new caretaker is not aware of what to do. There is limited research that shows the long-term effects of the use and exposure to production of methamphetamine. These children should be monitored closely, as they are more susceptible due to their age. In many instances, children have long-term medical needs, due to being burned by the chemicals used to make the drug. The caretakers are not being charged with crimes relating to the neglect and abuse of their children. The issues must be addressed. If the situations are not monitored then the children could end up back in the home that they were removed from. Agencies must provide a united front to protect the children and meet their needs. The protocol should be implanted as each partner has a role, but at present, each agency is working as a separate entity unto itself. In reality, each agency should be working toward safety and protection of those in their community. Each agency should be committed to this task, and held accountable by the community if they are not committed. Agencies are often overwhelmed by the tasks that they are held accountable for, however if each agency is only responsible for one part of the process, it becomes manageable.

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